

MEMORIAL

OF

WM. H. ASPINWALL, JOHN L. STEPHENS, AND HENRY
CHAUNCEY,

IN REFERENCE

To the Construction of a Railroad across the Isthmus of Panama

DECEMBER 11, 1848.

Ordered to be printed.

To the Honorable the Senate and House of Representatives :

The memorial of Wm. H. Aspinwall, John L. Stephens, Henry Chauncey, and their associates,

RESPECTFULLY REPRESENTS :

That the acquisition of California and the settlement of our boundary line in Oregon have opened a new era in the history of this country. Of the value of these new territories they do not propose to speak, further than to say that the mildness of the climate, the richness of the soil, the great promise of mineral wealth, and, above all, the long line of coast, with the magnificent harbors on the Pacific, seem to be sufficiently appreciated by all classes of our people. At this moment, hundreds of young men, full of enterprise, from our eastern States, are buffeting the storms of Cape Horn, while, with the coming spring, the hardy pioneers of the west will be moving by thousands over the desolate prairies, or climbing the rugged steeps of the Rocky Mountains, to build up for us new States on the Pacific. Already it is felt as a hardship by those who go out from amongst us, that, once settled in California and Oregon, they are, to a great extent, cut off from all the dearest relations of life; that there are no means of returning, or of personal intercourse with friends at home, except by the stormiest passage ever known at sea, or the most toilsome journey ever made by land.

In view of this condition of things, and to hold out some encouragements to emigrants that they might not be virtually expatriated when upon our own soil; and with the further view of facilitating communications with our military and naval stations on the Pacific, Congress, at its session before the last, established a line of monthly mail steamers from New York to Chagres, on the Atlantic side of the isthmus of Panama, and from Panama, on the Pacific side, to California and Oregon. This will no doubt answer sufficiently the great purpose of facilitating correspondence by mail

with those territories, but it cannot answer, to any extent, the immediate and pressing want of a thoroughfare for travel, which women and children may pass over; nor can it answer at all the constant and sometimes pressing occasions for the transportation of men, munitions of war, and naval stores, for our military and naval stations on the Pacific; all of which, however great the emergency, and at whatever sacrifice of time and money, must go by the long and hazardous voyage around Cape Horn, or by the wild paths across the Rocky Mountains, for half the year covered with snows and entirely impracticable.

The isthmus of Panama is about fifty miles in breadth—less than on any other part of the continent of America; and from the falling off of the great range of Cordilleras, running from the Rocky Mountains to the Andes, it has always been considered as the region in which, if ever, an easy communication would be effected, either by canal or road, between the two seas. The route over it is probably worse now than in the early days of Spanish dominion, when the gold of Peru passed over it to freight with almost fabulous wealth the argosies of Spain. No wheel carriage has ever attempted to cross it, the present mode of doing so is by canoe up the Chagrés river, set for a great part of the distance by poles against the current, and requiring twenty-eight to thirty hours to Cruces. Thence to Panama there is a mule road of eight or ten hours, difficult at all times for women and children, particularly with the effects of a moving or emigrating party, and during the rainy season almost impassable.

The Pacific Mail Company, charged with the transportation of the mail from Panama to California and Oregon, comprising your memorialists, immediately on assuming the obligations of their contract, saw the necessity, for their own interest, of improving the road across the isthmus; and after a consultation with several gentlemen in high position at Washington, who appreciated its importance in a national point of view, took upon themselves the burden and expense of fitting out an expedition for the purpose of an examination and survey. One of their associates, to whom the execution of this work was intrusted, passed the last winter on the isthmus, attended by two engineers of high standing, who, besides making general observations upon the face of the country, commenced a regular survey at high water mark on the shore of the Pacific, and carried it across the Cordilleras down to the first stream that empties into the Atlantic; when the further prosecution of the work was broken up by the setting in of the rainy season, and the party returned to New York.

The scheme of this company, in incurring the expense of this expedition, contemplated, as your memorialists understand, some action on the part of the government, in the way of its aiding in the construction of at least a good wagon or plank road; but the result satisfied them, that from the broken character of the country, and the deluges of the rainy season, this would be a work of far greater magnitude than they had expected; and in the mean time a new aspect has been given to this matter, by the important action of the government itself.

A treaty has been negotiated with the government of New Granada, by which the United States have undertaken, in consideration of a free and uninterrupted right of way over the isthmus of Panama, by any road or roads then existing or thereafter to be made, to guaranty to that republic the neutrality of the isthmus, and the sovereignty of the republic of New Grenada over it; so that, if the isthmus should be invaded by

any foreign power, the United States are bound to protect it with their army and navy. This treaty, so new in its character and so important in the obligations it assumes, was ratified by the Senate, as your memorialists understand, without a dissenting voice; and your memorialists regard it as a manifest indication, on the part of our government, of the great national importance of a free and uninterrupted passage at all times and forever across the isthmus of Panama, as the closing act of that policy which established the mail route to California and Oregon by way of that isthmus, and as devolving upon the government the necessity of lending its countenance towards the improvement of the road across it; without which, they respectfully represent, the heavy obligations of the treaty will be attended with no equivalent advantage, and the right of way, thus wisely secured, can never be fully enjoyed.

Impressed with the importance of this matter as involving the prosperity of California and Oregon, and the welfare of all who are in any way connected with our citizens in those territories; and regarding it as vitally affecting the best interests of our government, in a political and pecuniary point of view; and having under their control the maps, drawings, and other information procured by the Pacific Mail Company, your memorialists have secured to themselves an exclusive grant or privilege for ninety-nine years, from the republic of New Granada, for constructing a railroad across the isthmus of Panama; and they come before your honorable body to ask the co-operation and aid necessary for carrying out this great American work.

They beg leave to say, that its speedy completion by private enterprise alone, without the countenance of government, cannot be expected. Privilege after privilege, similar to that which they now hold, has been granted to others, and all have failed. It does not promise any immediate or certain returns; and for complete and early success, it requires some engagement, for employment and compensation by the government, as an inducement to capitalists to unite with your memorialists in furnishing the necessary means.

Your memorialists believe that events have been rolling on towards the consummation of this long-talked of work, and that the appointed time has now arrived; that the acquisition of California by the United States, and the establishment of an organized government in our Territory of Oregon, have fixed the period, and the hands, by which it is to be accomplished; that it has become the destiny of this country, for its own interest, for the benefit of its own people, and for the good of the world, alone, promptly, and without delay, to achieve an enterprise which, for more than three centuries, has, under some aspect, been contemplated and proposed by all the great powers of Europe. It is under a strong sense that they but speak the feelings of the great mass of our people, that they have ventured to embark in the enterprise before them, and to aim at becoming instruments in carrying out a work which, from the time when Nunez Balboa, from the heights of Darien, first saw the great South Sea, has occupied the minds of all civilized people; which must reflect honor upon American enterprise; and which, by bringing into close relations the most distant parts of our republic, must add to and enlarge the sphere of human happiness.

Your memorialists hope that these and other considerations of the like nature may have all proper influence upon your honorable body; but

they ask your co-operation on none of these grounds. They ask it only on the grounds—first, of economy and pecuniary saving to the government in the transportation of men, munitions of war, and naval stores, to our military and naval stations in California and Oregon; and, second, on the higher and more important political ground of being able, on an emergency, and when occasion requires, to send reinforcements and supplies in less than thirty days, instead of six months, as required to send them around Cape Horn or across the Rocky mountains. They ask no advance of money towards the construction of the road, and no compensation until services are performed; but they respectfully pray your honorable body to empower and direct the Secretary of the Navy to enter into a contract with your memorialists for the transportation on said road, for a period of twenty years, of naval and army supplies, including troops, munitions of war, provisions, naval stores, the mails of the United States, and its public agents, at a sum not exceeding the amount now specified by law to be paid for the transportation of the mails alone from New York to Liverpool; provided, that your memorialists shall within one year commence, and within three years complete, the construction of a railroad across the isthmus of Panama, connecting the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

WM. H. ASPINWALL.
JOHN L. STEPHENS.
HENRY CHAUNCEY.